

# VAMPIRE BATS

Bats are the only mammals that can fly. The vampire bat is one of nearly 1,000 known bat species and is greatly feared because of stories associated with vampires.

Vampire bats are very adaptable and can live in a wide variety of warm habitats. In an undisturbed rainforest they exist in small groups of 20-100 individuals. They live in caves or hollow trees, roosting during the day by hanging upside down.

The vampire bat has one source of food, the blood of other mammals. When a bat approaches its prey it lands close to the sleeping animal, usually a larger mammal such as the tapir. The bat will walk or hop up to it then climb up and find a suitable meal site. These bats have special heat sensors in their noses to find veins that are close to the skin. They lick the site with their tongue, shave off hair, and then slice off a circular piece of skin with their razor sharp teeth. The bite is painless and rarely wakes a sleeping victim. The bat then laps up the blood that oozes from the wound. There is a chemical in the bat's saliva that keeps the blood from clotting. They may often feed for 30 minutes and drink 50 to 100 percent of their own body weight. They have expandable stomachs which become so swollen they find it hard to fly after feeding. Because blood is 80 percent water, the bats will begin urinating as soon as they start feeding to get rid of excess water.

Studies have shown that up to 30 percent of the bats in a group will not find food on a given night. They can't survive more than two days without a meal so it is common for a bat that has fed to vomit up some of its meal for an unfed bat in its group, knowing that the other bat will do the same for it on another occasion.

The body of a vampire bat is the size of a man's thumb and it has a wingspan of about 20cm. Bat wings are actually long fingers covered by thin skin. Unlike other bats, the vampire bat can run and hop along the ground. It has to be light on its feet to avoid detection when approaching its prey. It has very strong hind legs and can spring into the air from the ground without spreading its wings. Jumping is its main way of avoiding the kicking hooves and swishing tails of the large mammals it wishes to feed on. It has a clawed thumb that comes out of the front edge of the wing, which is used for climbing around on its prey.

The mother usually gives birth to only one baby bat after a gestation period of seven months. The newborn bat is well developed and its eyes are open at birth. It is fed milk by its mother for two months and then begins to feed on blood that the mother regurgitates. When they are four months old they go hunting with the mother. The life span of a vampire bat is at least 12 years in the wild.

Vampire bats are very social animals. They will belong to a group of about 20 females and their young, protected by a lone adult male. Young females usually stay with their mother when they reach maturity which means that many of the group will be related. They recognise each other and greet each other when returning from feeding. When they are roosting they cling together in a tight cluster. They spend most of the day grooming each other which helps to create a strong social bond, and keeps them clean. The group stays together over a long period of time. Some females have been observed roosting together for 12 years.



Man is rapidly destroying the rainforest, the natural habitat of the vampire bat, and the land is now being used to raise cattle. This is providing the vampire bat with an unlimited food supply. As a result vampire bat populations have increased enormously. Groups of up to 2,000 are now found near herds of cattle and horses. Farmers attempt to control them because large numbers of vampire bats stress cattle and they can carry diseases that affect cattle and humans. Unfortunately, methods such as dynamiting caves mean that millions of harmless bats are often destroyed at the same time.